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## Why isn't everybody talking about music and Autism?

Do you think of music as the property of the music therapist who comes in once a week? What if it's a bigger thing for many people with autism, something that connects very deeply? Could it be a tool for many of us to use, aiding connection, communication, motivation in our varied disciplines? Maybe you do already! My life, work and study of the last 13 years leads me to believe that it could be and to wonder why we're not all talking about it.

It was in 2003, when I was still a professional performing musician, that I first experienced the extraordinary response that music workshops are met with in SLD Special Schools. Comments from the disbelieving "Our children don't sit that long," to the incredulous "my child never pays attention like that" began to follow our work with some regularity. Beginning to work in one particular school on a weekly basis, I noticed that if I "accompanied" a child's movements, playing a march as they walked along, or sliding down the notes on the keyboard to a bump at the bottom if they fell or dropped something, some children became very interested in me and my keyboard. I started working individually with those children. A silent child began to vocalise, a child with severe behaviour issues sat like a lamb every week and started to learn melodies at the piano and a painfully shy child sang a full Disney song with words and actions first to her teacher, then to her class, later to the whole school. After some time the staff of the school began to say to me "Do you not know that almost all the children you work with have autism?" I thought we were choosing the ones who responded most to music...

I studied first at Queens University Belfast and then, after leaving my job as a professional horn player, at Goldsmiths under Prof Pamela Heaton, one of the leading researchers in music and autism. I met and worked with John Lubbock of [Music for Autism](#) and heard his accounts of unexpected positive relational and behavioural responses from children with autism when exposed to live music. I observed [Prof Adam Ockelford](#) at work developing the gifts of exceptionally talented children with severe autism. I saw music used to help young adults with autism on the difficult path of transition from school into the community. And as a board member of the Northern Ireland Music Therapy Trust, I became familiar with the work of music

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therapy and its potential to improve aspects of attention, social interaction and communication. I have come to believe that music has an extraordinary place in the lives of many people with autism.

The research base is small but growing and papers from music psychology, neuro-imaging, music therapy and music education start to form an empirically trustworthy picture to support the anecdotal evidence.

A remarkable number of people with autism can tell the identity of a note without reference to an instrument - 1:20 (Brown et al., 2003). It's a skill very few typically developing people have - 1:10,000 (Takeuchi & Hulse, 1993). Compared with typically developing controls, children with autism are ahead in telling the difference between one note and another when they were close together in pitch (Heaton, 2005), and even when they were closer together than in normal musical usage (Stanutz, Wapnick, & Burack, 2014). They are ahead in telling the difference between the instruments playing the notes (Heaton, 2009) and they can remember music better (Stanutz et al., 2014). While recognising an emotion on someone's face is a struggle for many with autism (Harms, Martin, & Wallace, 2010), when the emotion is portrayed in music identifying it is not a problem (Allen, Hill, & Heaton, 2009; Heaton, Hermelin, & Pring, 1999) - an fMRI study showed that there were no abnormalities in neural networks involved in emotion recognition in music (Gebauer, Skewes, Westphael, Heaton, & Vuust, 2014). Lim (2010) has found that music can be used to help language acquisition. Ockelford (2013) presents case studies where children with severe autism are seen to use music as a complex language that can even include humour. Sharda et al (2015) found that the brain patterns of typically developing and autistic people were very different listening to spoken words, but not when the same words were sung. The 2014 Cochrane Review (Geretsegger, Elefant, Moessler, & Gold, 2014) found that social interaction and communication skills could both be improved by music therapy intervention. And not surprisingly, with all these findings, music is found to be motivational to people with autism (Heaton, 2009).

So can we bring music and autism out from behind musicians' closed doors onto a public stage? But perhaps you already do sing with your clients? Can we talk some more?

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